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ABSTRACT

An outline is given of an exercise program for older adults which is designed to increase strength, endurance, and flexibility. Brief descriptions are provided of exercises progressing from modest tone-ups for flexibility to activities involving mildly strenuous physical efforts such as jogging, bicycling, and hiking. Suggestions are offered for participating in the program enjoyably and without strain. It is noted that the growing population of older adults should participate in such programs because exercise increases the ability to cope with stress, helps to maintain independence and can improve self image. (JD)

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EXERCISE PROGRAMS FOR CITIZENS SIXTY AND OVER--WHY NOT?

Frank Butts, Ed.D. and Gene Anderson, Ed.D.

With over 28 million Americans or 13 percent of our country's population having reached the age of sixty, we as providers of recreation service can ill afford to neglect or even appear to slight this ever growing segment of our society Furthermore, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, as medical care and living standards continually improve, this minority is predicted to exceed 17 percent of the total population within 50 years. Therefore, community recreation practitioners indeed have a challenge to provide meaningful recreative programs and experiences to this group of citizens, most of whom have ample time to engage in leisure pursuits.

To illustrate a practical example of such a leisure time program, this article discloses an "Exercise Program for Citizens Sixty and Over" which was implemented during the spring of 1981 in Oxford, Mississippi.

The Program

The Department of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation at the University of Mississippi in conjunction with the Oxford Parks and Recreation Commission conducted a three phased activity program for people over sixty years of age. This program was developed under the auspices of the National Association for Human Development and the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. The program was conducted three days per week for eight weeks. The intended results of these activity programs are threefold. (1) to increase strength; (2) to increase endurance; and, (3) to increase flexibility.

The content of the three phases was as follows:

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Phase I of the program consisted of relatively uncomplicated, flexibility exercises, a majority of which could be performed while remaining seated. Some of the exercises included in Phase I were as follows: shoulder touch with the hands and extending the arms laterally; shoulder shrug; upper torso twist; back stretch from an erect sitting position; leg lift; and finger extensions. While standing behind and holding onto a chair, an individual may perform quarter squats, leg swings, and a weight shift from the toes on the left foot to those on the right. Phase I is a recommended prerequisite for participation in Phase II.

Phase II consisted of moderate level strength exercises. Exercises in this phase included: standing reach; palm stretches; side bends; bending at the waist; calf stretches; ankle grasps while in a seated position; back arch; sitting knee pulls; arm swings; shoulder rotations; arm curls using books; and abdominal curls. Again, Phase I and II are recommended prerequisites for Phase III.

Phase III of the program promoted endurance type activities such as dancing, hiking, jogging, or bicycling, which can be suited to each individual's capabilities. Other exercise activities include the following: alternate arm swings; reverse arm swing and torso twisting; body circle; side benders; alternate toe touches; alternate leg swinging; spine stretch; head curl/leg lift; hip twist; leg raises; leg raisers to the side; alternate knee pulls; abdominal stretch; flutter kicking; prone arches; and modified sit-ups.

In addition to these various exercises, a modest walking program was implemented. Beginning with Phase I, each of the individuals walked

for five minutes following the basic exercise program. This may seem like a relatively short period of time; however, a majority of participants had not been regularly participating in any type of exercise. The walking program was also progressive inasmuch as during Phases II and III each of the participants walked for ten and fifteen minutes, respectively. Throughout the program, all exercises were performed to music of various tempos with the aid of visual slide demonstrations.

WHY SHOULD OLDER ADULTS ENGAGE IN EXERCISE

Many times the question may be asked why older adults should participate in exercise programs. The answer to this question seems to be fourfold: (1) Exercise increases one's ability to cope with stress and stress related situations. For many individuals, frequent involvement in some sort of physical activity helps reduce mental fatigue, tension, strain or simple boredom. In addition, research indicates that physically active people are less likely to experience heart attack or other forms of cardiovascular disease than sedentary people. The active person who does suffer from a coronary attack is likely to have a less severe one and is more apt to survive and recover.

(2) A sound exercise program may help improve the "quality of life." The greatest benefit of maintaining physical fitness is the degree to which it helps one maintain independence. This is an asset especially valuable for older Americans. There are great psychological rewards for being able to plan and do things without depending upon relatives, friends, or hired help. The strength and endurance developed through regular exercise enables an individual to perform daily tasks with relative ease, thus minimizing the physical efforts required to perform routine tasks.

(3) An exercise program will enable an individual to sustain the ability to engage in activity, thereby improving their self-image. Poise and grace are natural by-products of efficient movement. Exercise may also aid an individual to look, feel and work better.

(4) Demographic shifts, as discussed previously, dictate that we help provide ways for this growing population to support themselves. It is economically essential that this population is able to maintain an active, meaningful, and productive life style. Perhaps programs similar to the previous can be instrumental in achieving such a goal.

REACTIONS OF PARTICIPANTS TO PROGRAM

Upon discussing the spring of 1981 exercise program with the participants, one can noticeably observe the impact of the program. In fact, participants' comments ranged from ". . .it would be great if we could continue the exercise class throughout the year. . ." to ". . .I am an example of how the exercise sessions have helped my arthritis. . ." to ". . .this is the first exercise we (wife and husband) have done in years. . ."

Furthermore, as part of a pilot study, the participants were tested (before and after the eight week session) for a life satisfaction value. As indicated in the results, over 50 percent of the participants demonstrated a significant increase in their life satisfaction value score at the termination of the program. Indeed, exercise programs are not "cure alls;" however, such programs represent a most admirable leisure time pursuit.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ADULT FITNESS PROGRAMS

In order to gain the maximum value and enjoyment from an exercise program and at the same time suffer a minimum of discomfort, the following suggestions may be helpful.

1. Have a thorough medical examination including a stress test before beginning.
2. Dress appropriately so that you can move freely this may also put you in the proper frame of mind.
3. Exercise regularly (at least 3 days per week).
4. Exercise should be increased gradually (this will help to avoid soreness and muscle strain). Begin with a minimum number of exercises and increase the number of repetitions gradually over a period of time until you reach your goal.
5. Do Not over do it. You should be able to perform the exercise the following day without undue soreness or stiffness.
6. To help prevent soreness and to eliminate it, exercises should be done slowly, without quick jerky motions.
7. Start each exercise period with light exercises to warm-up and avoid soreness.
8. Do not hold your breath during exercise. Breathe normally.

9. Emphasize full range of motion for each skeletal joint.
10. Concentrate on strengthening and stretching activities which involve the large muscle groups. Do not spend the entire exercise period working on one set of muscles.
11. Do not do just the easy exercises--pay attention to the weak areas of the body.
12. If your exercise program becomes tedious or boring, add a variety of exercises or perform them to music at various tempos.
13. Keep the exercise period to 25-30 minutes and well organized.
14. If you are trying to lose weight, don't worry about increasing your appetite through exercise. Studies have shown these increases to be negligible.
15. End your exercise period with a nice warm bath or shower to complete that feeling of "relaxed well-being."
16. There is no such thing as "effortless exercise." Fancy machines, girdles, belts, and couches are not effective for "spot reducing," breaking up fatty deposits, or "melting away fat." All too often these methods only prove to be expensive and unproductive.

RESOURCES

For more information, you can write:

The National Association for Human Development
1750 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W.
Washington, D. C. 20006

or for help in developing a model program, contact:

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In addition, the following film (no charge) may be of interest:

"Health, Fitness, Leisure for a Quality Life"
NEA
AV Studio B-2
1201 16th Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036